

MARIAN ANDERSON

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BASIC BIOGRAPHY

Marian Anderson (1897–1993) discovered the power of her voice at a young age. The Philadelphia native possessed a unique contralto range that helped her become an internationally acclaimed talent. Despite being denied entry into several conservatories because of her race, Anderson’s private training with top vocal instructors led her to performances from New York’s Carnegie Hall to Paris. She entertained several European monarchs and was the first African American to sing at the White House when she accepted an invitation from Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt in 1936. Throughout her career she dealt with segregation in America, and in 1939 the Daughters of the American Revolution refused to allow her to perform at Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C. A national backlash to this decision, spearheaded by Eleanor Roosevelt’s resignation from the DAR in protest, led to Anderson singing for 75,000 people on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on Easter Sunday 1939. After this key moment for civil rights, she continued her groundbreaking career, along the way becoming the first African American to perform at the New York Metropolitan Opera in 1955. In 1963, she sang at the March on Washington and received the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

KEY EVENTS

Easter Sunday Concert (April 9, 1939), First Performance at New York Metropolitan Opera (January 7, 1955), John F. Kennedy’s Inauguration (January 20, 1961), Lyndon B. Johnson’s Inauguration (March 20, 1965)

KEY PEOPLE

Eleanor Roosevelt, Harold Ickes, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

After the era of Reconstruction (1865–1877) African Americans faced the rise of “Jim Crow” laws, which maintained segregation while simultaneously disenfranchising African Americans. By the early twentieth century, these ideas were firmly entrenched. The Supreme Court confirmed the legality of segregation in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) so long as facilities were equal for races. African Americans faced challenges in both the North and the South. Organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) with leaders such as W.E.B. Du Bois, formed to fight for racial equality, but at the time of Marian Anderson’s concert in 1939, the civil rights actions of Martin Luther King, Jr., and his contemporaries were still over a decade away.



Roger Smith, Marian Anderson mural dedicated..., January 1943, Library of Congress (LC-USE6- D-007911), <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2017695476/>

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

- Divide students into pairs and distribute one copy of the handout for each student.
- Cue audio recording or download the audio from the National Archives.
 - » The Harold Ickes speech runs from 1:18–5:00.
 - » The first Marian Anderson song, “America”, runs from 5:25–7:20.
- Direct students read the background paragraph at the top of the handout and answer the “Establish Context” question with their partner.
- Project the image of the concert from the handout onto the board.
- Students should answer the “Take a Look” questions and share answers.

LEARNING ACTIVITY

- Play the clip of Harold Ickes (1:15–5:00). Students should answer the first “Have a Listen” question. Share responses.
- Play Marian Anderson’s song, “America” (5:25–7:00). Students should answer the second “Have a Listen” question. Share responses.
- Direct students to individually answer the “Wrap It Up” question and share responses.



Harris & Ewing, Washington's prominent figures listen to Marian Anderson's singing..., April 9, 1939, Library of Congress (LC-DIG-hec-2645), <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2016875409/>

FUN FACT

No color photographs exist from the Easter Sunday concert. However, Marian Anderson wore a stunning orange jacket. That jacket is now in the Smithsonian Institution's collection. You can read more about it here: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/when-marian-anderson-sang-lincoln-memorial-her-voice-stunned-the-crowds-her-gold-trimmed-jacket-dazzled-180950454/>.

LOCAL CONNECTION

Marian Anderson's Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, residence is now a museum, operated by the Marian Anderson Historical Society. Visit <http://marianandersonhistoricalsociety.weebly.com/> to learn more or schedule a tour.

LEARN MORE

PRIMARY SOURCES

Letter from Eleanor Roosevelt to Mrs. Henry Roberts, February 26, 1939
Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library & Museum
<https://www.archives.gov/historical-docs/todays-doc/?dod-date=226>

Marian Anderson Audio Recordings
Library of Congress

<https://www.loc.gov/search/?fa=online-format:audio&q=marian+anderson>

Marian Anderson Papers
Kislak Center for Special Collections, Rare Books and Manuscripts, University of Pennsylvania Library
http://dla.library.upenn.edu/dla/ead/detail.html?id=EAD_upenn_rbml_MsColl200

SECONDARY SOURCES

American Originals: Eleanor Roosevelt
National Archives and Records Administration
https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/american_originals/eleanor.html

"Marian Anderson: Musical Icon"
PBS *American Experience*
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/eleanor-anderson/>

"This Day In History: Marian Anderson Sings at Lincoln Memorial"
HISTORY®
<http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/marian-anderson-sings-at-lincoln-memorial>

MARIAN ANDERSON: MORE THAN JUST MUSIC?

“In a dramatic and celebrated act of conscience, Eleanor Roosevelt resigned from the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) when it barred the world-renowned singer Marian Anderson, an African American, from performing at its Constitution Hall in Washington, DC. Following this well-publicized controversy, the federal government invited Anderson to sing at a public recital on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. On Easter Sunday, April 9, 1939, some 75,000 people came to hear the free recital. The incident put both the artist and the issue of racial discrimination in the national spotlight.”

“American Originals” Exhibit, National Archives and Records Administration

ESTABLISH CONTEXT

Why would some Americans view the actions of the DAR as normal during the 1930s? Can you name any other situations like the one outlined above?

TAKE A LOOK



View of 75,000 people gathered to hear recital by Marian Anderson at the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, Easter Sunday, April 9, 1939, National Archives, Still Picture Branch, 306-NT-965B-4 https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/american_originals/leleanor.html

First Impression: What is the first thing you notice about this picture?

A Closer Look: What are two other things that stand out?

Think Like a Photographer: Why might the photographer have taken the picture from this vantage point instead of a picture of Marian Anderson at the microphone?

HAVE A LISTEN

Listen to Harold Ickes' introduction for Ms. Anderson, and then listen to the first song on Ms. Anderson's program.

*Audio, Marian Anderson Performs on the Steps of the Lincoln Memorial: With an Introduction by Harold Ickes, April 9, 1939
National Archives and Records Administration (1729137), <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/1729137>*

What are three phrases that Ickes used to demonstrate the concert's resistance to the prejudice of the times?

Marian Anderson was one of the world's premiere opera singers. The program contained many pieces in many languages. Why might she have chosen to open with this simple, familiar song for this particular concert?

WRAP IT UP

Some historians argue that the concert was a turning point in the Civil Rights Movement. Based on what you just read, heard, and analyzed, why might they make that argument?